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Senators advance Central project

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The chances of a new visitor center at Little Rock's Central High School opening by the 50th anniversary of its integration in 2007 improved Thursday with the action of a U.S. Senate committee.

The Senate Appropriations Committee voted to designate \$5.1 million for the center in the federal Interior Appropriations Bill for fiscal 2006. While Sen. Mark Pryor, a Democrat from Arkansas, expects the bill to pass the full Senate, he said he "has some work to do" to get the bill through the House.

Last year Congress approved \$733,000 for the planning and design of the new visitor center at the Little Rock Central High School National Historic Site. The new center will have six times the exhibit space than the current center that is housed in a converted Mobil gas station.

"Our goal, and we're going to work very hard ... is to get that visitors center completely finished by the 50th anniversary," said Pryor, who made the announcement with Sen. Blanche Lincoln, also a Democrat from Arkansas.

Michael Madell, superintendent of the National Historic site, said the Senate committee vote is "a very significant step."

Madell will go before the National Park Service's Development Advisory Board on June 28 to seek approval of the visitor center's architectural plans and design. If Congress approves the \$5.1 million for the next fiscal year, construction could begin in March 2006, he said.

In addition to exhibit space, the new center will include a multi-purpose room, offices, restrooms and archival storage space.

The current center is so small that groups of more than 35 members must split into smaller groups and wait outside before touring the exhibit, which can be a problem during inclement weather, Lincoln said.

"The events that took place at Central High in 1957 really did shape our nation," she said to the members of the Little Rock Nine during a teleconference. "They deserve to be preserved. We've got future generations out there who need to understand the sacrifices that were made there by you all and so many."

The new center will also serve as an economic boon and image booster for the state, said Nine member Ernest Green, who lives in the Washington area.

Central High became internationally known Sept. 2, 1957, when Gov. Orval Faubus sent Arkansas National Guardsmen there. Faubus said he called out the National Guard "to maintain ... the peace and good order of the community" and directed the Guard to prevent nine black students from entering the all-white school.

Faubus removed the Guardsmen on the order of a federal judge. When the black students went to Central three days later, on Sept. 23, a violent crowd gathered. The students were removed for their protection.

President Eisenhower then federalized the National Guard and sent 101st Airborne Division troops to the school the next day to enforce the school's integration. The black students attended school the rest of the year under federal protection.

During the teleconference Thursday, Little Rock Nine member Melba Pattillo Beals told Sen. Pryor, "You are a miracle worker." Beals is chairman of the Communications Department of Dominican University in San Rafael, Calif.

Several members of the Little Rock Nine said that when they integrated Central High, they never imagined that millions of dollars would one day be spent to build a center that memorialized their experience.

"No way did we expect anything of this nature," said Nine member Carlotta Walls LaNier of Denver.

Minnijean Brown Trickey of Little Rock said she didn't expect to live through the 1957-58 school year, let alone to see tributes to her and the other eight.

"This hurt all of the children. It hurt everybody in the city," she said. "I think this visitor center is an opportunity for healing."